[Mrs. Cruickshank #3]

Mass. 1938-9 Mrs. Cruickshank - Berkshire Hill-Town Wife

Paper Three

STATE MASSACHUSETTS

NAME OF WORKER WADE VAN DORE

ADDRESS NEW MARLBOROUGH

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SUBJECT LIVING LORE

NAME OF INFORMANT MRS. CRUICKSHANK

ADDRESS NEW MARLBOROUGH

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“Do you have any of your mother's or grandmother's recipes?” I asked Mrs. Cruickshank one afternoon.

“No, that I haven't. My mother died when I was fifteen, and my grandmother died before that. And then we had a woman to do the cookin' an' other work. I didn't do much of that till I married Ben. I guess they never wrote out their receipts, ‘cause I never found any that they left. I remember the things my mother made though. I remember her packing a clothes basket with things to take to a provision party for the minister. She'd make little doughnuts” - Mrs. Cruickshank held up her hand and made a circle of her thumb and index finger to indicate the size - “then she covered them with white sugar. My, they looked nice, and tasted right good too. Then I remember the way she made pickles. She put the

cucumbers down in a crock of salt water in the fall, an' in the spring she took ‘em out an' soaked ‘em in vinegar.”

“Do you make them that way?”

“No - I buy ‘em at the store. They are really better, I think. It's all I can do to put up some peaches in the fall. We always take a day off an' drive over to York state for a bushel or so.”

“Did your grandmother or your mother do much canning?”

“No, not the way they do it now. We had a root cellar for beets an' carrots an' potatoes an' cabbates, stuff like that, an' we kept squash till after Christmas sometimes, in th’ spare bedroom - where it was cool an' dry but not cold. Mostly they used to make 26 preserves and jelly - lots of that. An' they always canned blueberries, I remember. An' made apple butter an' cider. Some folks dried apples too, but we never did.”

“Speaking of food,” I said, “it must be time for you to be getting supper, and I should be starting home.”

“Now you're not goin' home!” exclaimed my hostess warmly. “Just you set right where you be, an' have some supper with us before you start out. I will go into the kitchen though, an' peel my potatoes.”

“Can't we keep on talking while you do that?” I asked, following her into the freshly scrubbed kitchen, with its big black range, worn washing machine, a rack full of damp baby things, and the dining table at one end. Mrs. Cruickshank began to peel what seemed to me an enormous basin full of potatoes.

“Seems like we eat a lot of potatoes,” she sighed. “I wish I had a penny for every bushel I've peeled. Even with Donal’ an' Bobby away I have some cookin' to do. Besides Junior an' Betty I have a boarder now. [He's?] workin' on one of the new bridges. He's real nice

too, an' what he pays helps a lot to set the table - course I sort of feel I have to have a little extry sometimes, for him." She set the potatoes on the stove to boil, and started slicing into a smoked shoulder of pork.

"Tell me more about when you were young," I suggested. "Besides providing most ofyour own food, did you do all your sewing?"

"Mamma made all our common clothes," she answered, "but our best dresses an' coats we had made by a dressmaker in the village.

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I remember once when I was about ten years old we went to R..... for a trip, on the cars, to visit some cousins of Mamma's, an' we had all new clothes. My, I certainly was excited. Took us all day to get there!" By "cars" I know that my friend means the train. I asked her when the mail order houses first came into general use.

"Why, the first I remember was when Junior was a baby - that'd be 25 years ago. That was the first we ordered from 'em - an' it wasn't one of these big ones we have now. I can hardly remember the name of it. Was it Charles William? Ben might know, but I've clean forgot, I guess. That reminds me, I have to send for some things for Bobby - "

"Will he be able to go back to school this year?"

"No, he won't. But I guess he won't miss too much."

"Tell me something more about the school," I said. "How did you feel about the little corner schoolhouse being closed, and the children going by bus to the village?"

"Well, I don't know. Course I sort of hated to see it closed. My mother an' father both went there to school, an' later they went to the academy over to G.... - have you seen the ruins over there[?] It was a good academy, then they used it a while for a summer hotel, but now

it's gone... Well, I went down to the little schoolhouse too, an' sometimes it was a cold walk in winter."

"Did the teacher board around, as I've heard about?"

"Not in my time, though I've heard tell about the teacher boarding a week for every child in the family that was / in school. My mother boarded the teacher, though, some years - one that lived over to G... Well, all my children went down there too, and just 28 when Donal' was through with the eighth grade they closed it. He would have been going to high school then anyway, an' I will say it was real handy to have the school bus go right by the door. Otherwise h'd have had to walk, unless we carried him in the car. That / school bus is none too easy to ride in, I guess, an' it's cold too. I don't wonder half the children are sick all winter."

"What's this I hear about the young man who drives it - did he rob the postoffice one time?"

"Yes, I guess he did, though they hushed it up[.?] He was light-fingered in the store some too. Doesn't hardly seem's if he's a good person to drive the bus, but Bobby says he's always nice to the children, an' sober too. I've heard tell he drinks some. His uncle owns the bus, that's how it happens he's the driver."

"Did you used to have the same school term we have now?"

"Yes, September to June, just about the same. Some places I've heard about they had special vacations for plowing an' planting an' such like, but most people around here had hired men so they didn't need the children to help 'cept for chores after school or somethin' like that."

By this time the potatoes had been boiling and bubbling for some time, and the meat was hissing in the skillet. There were string beans in another saucepan, and the table was set. Now the men began to come home for supper. Junior washed hastily at the kitchen

sink and went into the living room to play with his tiny 29 daughter. The boarder came in and listened to our talk for a while, then he went out to the shed and brought in an armful of wood for the depleted woodbox. Finally came the head of the household, good Ben Cruickshank, his ruddy face rather leaner than when I had seen him last. After a word of greeting he lost no time in asking,

“Well, what do you think of your neighbors the Bells by this time? Seen that grass fire they made down at Sheldons,’?” he demanded.

I shook my head at the first question, to indicate chagrin, then spoke. “Yes, I've seen it,” I admitted.

“Last Sunday they done it,” he went on. “First place, I guess you know, they was mighty put out cause Sheldons never went to call on them nor nawthin. Then they got th’ idea they'd ask Sheldons to sell ‘em their hay, so's to get in with ‘em. Leastways that's how I figger, an' I bet I'm right too. Well, they sent th’ old lady down to ask ‘em, an' finally Sheldons said they could have the hay. So Bells said they'd want to burn it over, it hadn't been cut so long. An' Sunday they went down. Well!’ “ he slapped his knee. “ here There they was, th’ hull kit ‘n' kaboodle of ‘em - granny, an' Mrs. Bell in her ridin' britches, an' the nursemaid an' baby, 'sides the hired hands, makin' a social occasion of it, all standin' around to watch the fire. mr Mr . Sheldon come out to see the way they done it, but Mrs. Sheldon, she stayed in the house, I guess. So there was the wimmen shinin' up to him, an' drinkin' in every word he said. He got awful worried ‘bout the fire though. It got right near the house, an' it did burn two of those old maples longside the road.

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Looks pretty bad now, an' smells wuss. Golly, I with they would've burned some buildin's an' got in trouble good! You know they're responsible for any fire they start, no matter what it does.” There was nothing mean or savage about the man's wish for revenge on his enemy - just a desire for some sort of justice.

“Well, now, you wouldn't want that lovely home of the Sheldons to be burned, would you?” I asked.

“No, I wouldn't,” he admitted. “But they'd ought to be settled good an' proper somehow. Been makin, fires on their own place too. I told ‘em once they wanted to cut away the high grass from the back of the house if they was goin' to have grass fires, or they'd burn the house. But they paid no mind. They did almost set afire the roof once last winter - only the snow on the roof saved it.”

“Land sakes, I sure would hate to see the old house burned,” declared Mrs. Cruickshank, “even if it doesn't mean much to me,” she hastened to add. “I often say I'm glad the Doctor doesn't know what's happened to the place. [?] He loved it.”

“We all do,” I told her warmly. “It is the most beautiful place around here, and it's a shame that someone can't have it who would appreciate it.”

“Sure don't look like much now,” muttered Ben. “Lawn all tracked up with hosses an' even carts, goat eatin' everythin' it's a mind too, manure everywhere.”

“Yes, the old lady sent me down one of the white violets before the goat had eaten them all,” I answered. “ It's in my wild [garden.?] But tell me, did you hear any more about their wanting to 31 paint the house white?”

“No, they got over that,” answered Mrs. Cruickshank as she dished up the potatoes, mashed by this time into frothy whiteness, “but now they reckon they'll s hingle the place! That's worse,” Her voice was more sad than indignant. “Come on, let's set.” So we all sat about the round table. All the men were hungry, and there was more or less of a silence until the first keen edge of [appe ite?] appetite was blunted.

“I hear the Bells have got Donald Shores workin' for ‘em too,” ventured Mrs. Cruickshank as she pressed another slice of meat upon me.

“Have,” uttered her husband briefly. “Sheldons told ‘em they didn't want him workin' down there on the hay, but I guess they took him down anyway. I declare those Bells do get the worst trash to work for ‘em! Anybody else wouldn't have that boy workin' for ‘em for narthin. Anybody with sense wouldn't want him around at all. Never saw anybody like those people. Sure are strange to this part the country. Well, they won't pull the wool over Sheldon's eyes. He's smart enough fer ‘em.”

“D'you know they're lettin' the old lady take in washin' from one of the neighbors?” asked Mrs. Cruickshank in horrified tones. “As if she didn't have enough to do, cookin' for all those men, an' keepin' house an' all. She's got no money of her own to spend for anything she needs, so she asked one of the neighbors if she could do her washin'. Course the neighbor was glad to get it done cheap too, but just the same it don't seem right. The old lady isn't 32 well, neither, an' the doctor told her not to work so hard. You'd think, now, wouldn't you, that the son or daughter would give her a little something for herself. Why, one morning her daughter, Mrs. Bell, even went down on horseback to get the washing, an' brought it home in a sack. Wan't that something now! I can't get over it! ”

“The other new hired man they have seems to be all right,” I murmured.

“Yes, I guess he is at that,” assented Mr. Cruickshank. “The old lady seems right fond of him. She says he's awful good to her - calls her 'mother’, an' that tickles her. He's considerate of her too - more'n her own two are. An' Mr. Sheldon said he never saw such a worker. Works’ if he owned the farm. Stayed up all one night, I hear, to build a new stall for another horse comin' - they got ten there now - just cause he got so interested. An' he's bought a batch of baby chicks to raise for broilers. Seems right ambitious for a hired man - wants to get ahead a little. I suspect he's meant for somethin' better, just markin' time till he can get another job, but makin' the most of it. He's married too - wife works in the city. She drives out to see him Sundays and always brings the old lady somethin'. Mother's Day her own two didn't remember her but this girl brought her a plant.”

All of us had finished eating, and I declined my hostess' urgent invitation to another cup of coffee. "I really must go soon," I insisted. "I have quite a long walk up the hill, but it is good to have a hard, firm road under foot again after all 33 the bad weather."

" isn't Isn't it! Seems' if we've had nothin' on the road but scrapers an' snow plows an' loads of gravel since September. Not that we aren't glad to see 'em coming after we've been waitin' a spell for 'em to come through an' clear the way. I guess everybody feels like cheerin'. Once last winter when it was awful cold the plow got almost as far as Sheldons' an' there was a big drift there. Mr. Sheldon come strugglin' down the road to tell the men that Mrs. Sheldon had coffee waitin' for 'em inside, an' they should come in an' get warm. So the men kept yellin' at Bill Murray, settin' on the tractor, ' give Give 'er more gas, Bill!' But Bill could hardly keep his seat as 'twas, the old tractor shakes so, an' he yelled back at 'em, 'Heck' - only he said somethin' else - 'Heck," you ain't a-sitten' on 'er!' I guess that old machine just about shakes a man to pieces, an' Bill was makin' it go just as fast as he could stand."

I rose to go, but before leaving elicited a promise from the little woman to come down and see us the following week.

"Come for dinner," I urged her, "and then we can have a real visit."

"I'll do that," she promised, "but don't you folks go fussin' none. I'll come Monday if nothin' happens to hinder me."

I left the warmth of the lighted kitchen and climbed 34 through the clear cold evening up the hillside road lighted only, and that faintly, by starlight. No car or person passed me on the lonely quiet way, and the five houses which I passed within my three mile walk were all silent, some of them dark besides even at this early hour.

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Monday came, warm and sunny, and our guest appeared near noon, carrying a paper bag. “It's some bloodroot I thought you'd like for your wild flower garden,” she smiled. “Maybe 'twon't live but then we can get some more. I knew this was growin' beside the road on the way. So I stopped an' dug it up. My land, it sure is rightly named - bloodroot! I got my hands all stained up, but I washed ‘em off a bit in a spring running into the ditch.”

While she spoke I led the way to a rocky patch beneath a wild cherry tree, where clumps of columbine were in bud, hepaticas just beginning to shed their petals, and trilliums springing up. Dry leaves were hastily raked away from an unoccupied spot, and holes dug up with a trowel.

“I certainly appreciate your bringing these!” I said, as I separated the clumps and set them in the damp earth. “We've been wanting some for a long while.”

“I s'pose they're all right in a place like this,” replied Mrs. Cruickshank, “but the menfolks always dig ‘em up an' burn ‘em when they find ‘em in a pasture. If cows or horses eat ‘em they bring on miscarriage. But I've heard 35 'twas used for medicine too - cough medicine. They used to squeeze the juice from the stem on a lump of sugar.”

My planting finished, we went into the house, where dinner was already on the table.

“We've no dessert,” I told our guest, “unless we eat fruit. Monday is a bad day for us.”

“Land sakes, I don't need dessert! But did you ever make a poor man's rice pudding?” We said we hadn't and she went on. “Well, you take five tablespoons of rice (the receipt says six, but we like it soft an' creamy so I only use five) an' a half-teaspoon o' salt, an' a quart o' milk. Then you put in a half cup o' sugar an' some raisins an' vanilla. You put it in to bake, an' after the rice starts gettin' soft you stir it up three, four times. It's real good.”

“But why do you call it poor man's pudding?”

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“Cause it hasn't any eggs I s'pose. Poor folks in a city couldn't afford a quart o' milk for pudding either, I guess. But we've always had lots of milk so we don't think anything of usin' a quart at a time.”